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Reds Say Korean Newsmen Didn't Defect, Claim Kidnap

PANMUNJOM, Korea (AP) — North Korea accused the U.N. command today of kidnapping a Communist newsmen who defected at this truce village, and demanded his immediate return.

U.S. Army Col. George F. Charlton, secretary of the U.N. command, rejected the Red demand and said that Lee So-keun, 44, vice president of the official North Korean Central News Agency, had defected to South Korea of his own initiative.

"The choice of an individual to decide where to live is a basic right of the peoples in all free nations," Charlton told North Korean Col. Han Chu-kyong.

Fled Amid Shooting

Lee fled from the armistice commission hut yesterday in a car with U.S. Lt. Col. Donald E. Thomson as Communist guards fired at least 40 bullets at them. Charlton protested the guards' action and accused them of "reckless" shooting.

Col. Han retorted that the guards fired because it was an "abnormal" situation in which a Communist newsmen was being abducted.

A North Korean broadcast earlier today also charged that Lee was kidnaped and accused U.S. military police of forcing him into the car. It said the incident was "part of the aggressive maneuvers of the U.S. imperialists to undermine the Korean armistice agreement, increase tension and ignite a new war."

Lee had come to Panmunjom with other Communist reporters to cover an armistice commission meeting. A Korean source said he went to U.N. officials an hour before the meeting ended and told them he wanted to defect to the South.

Guards, Newsmen Watching

After the session broke up, Thomson brought his car to the entrance of the conference building. Lee soon emerged from the building and in full view of about 50 Communist guards and newsmen jumped into the waiting car.

Thomson said two Communist guards tried to force their way into the car, but they were blocked by U.S. Army Capt. Thomas L. Bair, a security officer. The car sped off and the Communist guards on duty opened fire with their revolvers, but apparently no bullets hit the car.

As the car approached the southern exit of the security area, a Communist guard lowered a bar across the road, but the vehicle smashed its way through. Thomson said the bar hit the front fender, smashed the windshield, and hit the top of the car. He was cut slightly by shattered glass.

Maj. Gen. Richard C. Ciccollella, the senior U.N. delegate who had left in another car, took Lee by helicopter to the U.S. Army Hospital in Seoul 31 miles south of Panmunjom for a checkup. Lee was then turned over to South Korean security officials.

"Missed Freedom"

A Korean source said the first words Lee uttered when he arrived in South Korean hands were: "I missed freedom. Kim Il-sung (North Korean premier) won't be able to have a good night's sleep today for anger."

Lee is reported to have a wife, two sons and a daughter in Pyongyang, the North Korean capital.

South Korean Defense Minister Kim Sung-eun said he would recommend that Thomson, Bair and the American driver of the escape car — who was not identified — receive Korean citations for helping Lee get away.

Kim said Lee would receive \$3,700 from the Seoul government, the top award to Communists who defect.

Lee was the second Red journalist to defect at Panmunjom. A North Korean correspondent for the Soviet Communist party newspaper Pravda went over to the other side while covering armistice talks in 1959.